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WAUKEGAN — A pair of accolades for the Lake Michigan lakefront were touted by city officials this week — one laurel in the form of an award from an urban development think tank, and the other in the form of federal funding.

The funds were announced Wednesday by U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-Highland Park, who said \$2.6 million toward the continued removal of PCBs from Waukegan Harbor has cleared a House committee and will be included in the 2006 Energy and Water Appropriations Act.

Though the lion's share of the carcinogenic PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) were removed by multimillion-dollar dredging projects in the early 1990s, the job has yet to be completed in the inner harbor.

According to Director of Governmental Services Ray Vukovich, the \$2.6 million could go a long way toward both removing the last remnants of PCBs and transporting them to a cost-effective landfill, if upcoming developments fall in Waukegan's favor.

The city's master plan for downtown and lakefront redevelopment called for Waukegan to expedite its environmental cleanup by localizing its efforts as much as possible. Vukovich said the city hopes to store new dredged material on what is now the vacant OMC headquarters complex on Sea Horse Drive.

"We've been told a total cleanup could cost anywhere from \$4 million to \$20 million, depending on whether the material is trucked to a local landfill or sent out of state," Vukovich said.

Currently, Waukegan is awaiting a U.S. Department of Justice finding on final possession of the OMC complex, which sits on a 66-acre site and includes two existing PCB landfills. Vukovich said the city could take possession this summer, providing a site for new harbor dredging.

"This would take the last of the PCBs out of the harbor once and for all," said Vukovich, adding the Army Corps of Engineers' work would also add depth to the harbor and allow unrestricted marine traffic.

In a statement, Kirk said "no single project is more important to Waukegan's economy than the restoration of Waukegan Harbor." As in the past, he cited studies that claim "a clean harbor could add over \$800 million to Lake County property values, including an average increase in value of \$53,000 for homes in Waukegan."

The presence of PCBs in the harbor was first identified by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in 1976. At the time, the contamination was blamed on the past use of lubricating fluids in machinery at the Outboard Marine Corp.'s shoreline facilities.

After more than a decade of legal battles and environmental testing, the first cleanup efforts began in 1990 and continued through 1993. More than \$20 million has already been spent over the years to remove PCBs from the harbor, and officials estimate 90 percent of the initial contamination has been dredged up and trucked away.

A complete cleanup could lead to the harbor being removed from its status as a Great Lakes Area of Concern by the International Joint Commission, a move advocates say would make the harbor area more attractive to developers.

In another move that Waukegan hopes will draw developers to the shoreline, the city's master plan for downtown and lakefront redevelopment was one of 14 projects worldwide to be honored by the Chicago-based Congress for New Urbanism, a non-profit group that advocates restoration of existing urban centers, among other principles.

The plan, crafted by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, was praised by the group for taking "a fragmented urban fabric" and "tapping hidden assets and reconnecting severed neighborhood within a strong urban and natural framework."

"It's certainly something that we've been striving for, some national recognition for our lakefront plan — international recognition," Vukovich said.

Also receiving one of the group's 2005 Charter Awards were plans to develop an 88-acre bayfront in Toronto and establish housing for 800,000 people on a 750-square-mile island in Shanghai, China.

Redevelopment efforts in San Jose, Calif., Lakewood, Colo., and Norfolk, Va., were also honored, along with the proposed Intergenerational Learning Center at 104th St. and Michigan Avenue in Chicago.